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ABSTRACT

Multiage grouping and related instructional practices are being implemented with increasing frequency in classrooms across the nation. If implementation is carefully and knowledgeably planned, these innovations offer promising alternatives to traditional graded educational practices. This digest briefly describes issues to be considered before implementing such changes. It outlines what teachers and administrators need to know, the principal's role, organizational changes to be made ahead of time, and the importance of sufficient time and money. For example, schools that institute multiage grouping must also change their methods of instruction and facilitate developmentally appropriate practices. In addition, effective multiage teaching is more time-consuming than age-graded teaching, and schools should anticipate hiring additional teachers or paraprofessionals. (LMI)

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Implementing the Multiage Classroom

By Joan Gaustad

Multiage grouping (placing children ranging in age by three years or more in one class) and related instructional practices such as continuous-progress learning, developmentally appropriate practices, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning are being implemented with increasing frequency in classrooms across the nation. These research-based innovations offer promising alternatives to traditional graded educational practices—*if* implementation is carefully and knowledgeably planned. Perfunctory planning that ignores the magnitude and complexity of the change can produce disastrous results.

What Do Teachers Need to Know?

To meet the varied needs of multiage students, teachers need indepth knowledge of child development and learning and a larger repertoire of instructional strategies than most single-grade teachers possess. They must be able to design open-ended, divergent learning experiences accessible to students functioning at different levels. They must know when and how to use homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping and how to design cooperative group tasks. They must be proficient in assessing, evaluating, and recording student progress using qualitative methods such as portfolios and anecdotal reports.

Multiage teachers must be able to facilitate positive group interaction and to teach social skills and independent learning skills to individual students. They must know how to plan and work cooperatively with colleagues, as team teaching is commonly combined with multiage organization. Finally, they must be able to explain multiage practices to parents and other community members, building understanding and support for their use.

The critical judgment and common sense of teachers are essential ingredients in successful implementation. Methods that sound promising in theory may need considerable adaptation to be effective in practice. Ideally, teachers should have opportunities to observe competent models demonstrating multiage methods, try them out in the classroom, receive feedback on their efforts, reflect on the experience, revise their plans, and try again.

What Do Administrators Need to Know?

Administrators should understand the principles underlying multiage organization and developmentally appropriate instructional practices. In planning for implementation, however, knowledge about the change process may be even more valuable. Innovations often fail because policymakers give teachers insufficient time, training, and psychological support (Hord and others 1987). Effectively implementing a single innovation requires several years—and multiage teaching involves multiple, complex innovations.

Administrators must realize that many of the underlying assumptions of multiage teaching conflict with deeply ingrained assumptions underlying traditional age-graded instructional methods. Miller (1994) observes that for many teachers, "unlearning powerfully held notions about how children learn" is an essential part of implementing multiage practices. This process is demanding, even for the most receptive and flexible individuals.

Multiage instructional and organizational skills differ greatly from those used in the single-grade classroom. Veterans may feel as insecure as first-year teachers as they struggle to learn these new skills. In one school, Miller found that teachers with more experience seemed to feel even greater frustration in the early stages of change.

To help teachers weather this stressful transition process, administrators must provide psychological support as well as technical assistance. They must create a school culture that supports teacher learning, an environment in which it is safe to risk making mistakes. Without such support, many teachers will retreat to safe, familiar age-graded methods.

What Is the Principal's Role?

The principal plays a key role in creating this supportive school culture. The principal must provide teachers with opportunities to learn multiage teaching methods, monitor the progress of implementation, and give teachers praise, feedback, and suggestions. He or she should be

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adept at facilitating positive, cooperative interactions among teaching team members.

The principal must ensure that all teachers feel supported and endeavor to maintain a sense of community within the school. Innovative efforts by small groups of teachers can threaten to split teaching staff into "pro" and "con" subgroups; avoiding intraschool strife can resemble a delicate tightrope walk. The principal must also deal with teachers unwilling or unable to make the transition. Finally, the principal must build support for multiage practices in the larger community.

Facilitating this transition requires sophisticated leadership and interpersonal skills, as well as personal characteristics such as patience and empathy. But most administrators receive little or no formal training in these skills. Those who possess them have generally learned them from experience, says Fullan (1991). Principals need opportunities for professional development and for interaction with colleagues who are facing similar challenges. They need support from district administrators as they develop these facilitative skills.

What Changes Should Be Made First?

Many educators mistakenly think multiage grouping is the first—or even the only—element that needs to be changed. But according to Anita McClanahan, early childhood education coordinator for the Oregon Department of Education, mixing ages isn't the magic key to improvement. "You have to change your methods of instruction. It's what we *do* with the groups of children that makes a difference" (Gaustad 1994).

Multiage *organization* facilitates the use of developmentally appropriate practices. It may help teachers focus on students' individual needs by introducing so much diversity that age-graded methods become unworkable (Miller). But teachers need opportunities to learn multiage instructional skills before classroom organization is changed.

Where to begin is much less important than beginning well. It is best to build solid knowledge and skills in one area, then gradually move into other curriculum areas and add additional strategies. Thematic teaching, hands-on math, cooperative learning, assessment using portfolios—any developmentally appropriate approach can be a good place to start. Most work equally well with single-age and multiage groups, and all ultimately connect and overlap.

Organization can also be changed gradually. Teachers of different grade levels often introduce multiage grouping by mingling their students for occasional projects. Grant and Johnson (1994) suggest *looping*, in which a teacher stays with a group of same-age children for two years, as a natural step toward teaching children of mixed ages. Some schools have successfully made the change in one great leap, but as Miller reports, this takes a heavy toll on teachers.

How Important Are Sufficient Time and Money?

Sufficient time and money are essential ingredients in creating and maintaining the multiage classroom. Multiage teaching takes years to master, and long-term staff development is expensive. So is hiring substitutes to enable teachers to attend workshops and plan changes with their colleagues. Other expenses include developmentally appropriate instructional materials for children, books and videotapes for adult learners, and outreach efforts to build community support.

Effective multiage teaching is more time-consuming than age-graded teaching. One group of Oregon teachers listed daily preparation time, weekly team planning time, monthly inservice and curriculum development time, and occasional staff development time as essential on an ongoing basis (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School 1994). Creative scheduling can free up some time, but hiring additional teachers or paraprofessionals will likely be necessary. Raths and Fanning (1993) also suggest teachers be given computers for the "incredibly labor-intensive" clerical aspects of qualitative assessment.

Simply telling teachers to "squeeze it all in somehow" is *not* an option. Teachers often donate immense amounts of unpaid personal time during implementation, but few can maintain such sacrifice on a long-term basis, nor should they be asked to. Administrators must accept the challenge of communicating to the public that educational quality cannot exist without adequate financial support, and enlist their aid in providing these resources.

Resources

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